Buffalo and donkey meat: the facts in perspective

Some of the media reports on the research results of the article, “A high incidence of species substitution and mislabelling detected in meat products sold in South Africa” by Cawthorn et al. in Food Control 2013, Vol. 32, 440 – 449”, are not factually correct, says the Red Meat Producers’ Organisation (RPO).

At least one Sunday newspaper reported that meat of water buffalo, donkey and goat were present in 68% of the meat products that had been tested. The facts are that 68% of meat products that were tested contained species that had not been indicated on the label, with soya and gluten (>28%), pork (37%) and chicken (23%) occurring the most without having been indicated as such on the label.

The facts are: water buffalo meat was found in one out of 20 hamburger patties (5%), and one out of 30 sausage samples contained water buffalo meat (3%). Donkey meat occurred in one out of 30 samples (3%). This means that water buffalo meat appeared in less than 3% and donkey meat in less than 1% of the meat products that were tested. This obviously is bad enough and the guilty parties should be named and prosecuted since they discredited the entire meat industry.

It is also important to note that DNA was used for identification, which means that minute quantities of a species could be detected.

It was, therefore, also not possible to determine whether contamination took place as a result of deliberate blending, or as the result of apparatus not thoroughly cleaned after certain species had been handled. If the sausage sample had been analysed with the intestine present in the sample, pig DNA would obviously have been detected if the sausage casing consisted of pork intestine. Some of the assumptions were also based on limited numbers. For example, only one sample each of beef, viennas, pork sausages, Springbok biltong and Frankfurters was analysed. Only two samples of beef droëwors, beef loaf and Kudu biltong were analysed.

It must also be noted that no horse meat was found in any of the 139 samples that were analysed.

Improved education and training of butchers may partly address the problem of contamination of meat products. However, it is also important that all role players in the distribution chain, including the consumer, take note of the act prescribing correct labelling.

Trade with neighbouring countries

The RPO empath with local producers for the low prices they receive, but apart from certain monitoring actions, little can be done to prevent meat imports from neighbouring countries.

The Southern African Customs Union agreement and the Southern African Development Community agreement essentially create a free trade area, without any import duties payable, between South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland.

The fact that South Africa has not regained its foot and mouth disease free zone status also means that no limits can be placed on the importation of meat and stock from the foot and mouth disease free zone of Namibia. The same applies to beef imports from Botswana.

Namibia, Botswana and other neighbouring countries have preferential export agreements with the European Union. These agreements determine that some import duties do not have to be paid by these countries. These duties would otherwise amount to about R30/kg.

Exports to the EU from Namibia and Botswana are dependent on the implementing of traceability systems as well as other constraints. Botswana from time to time experiences problems with this system, which means that meat that was supposed to be exported to the European Union, ends up on the South African market. South Africa does not have a national traceability system in place, and can therefore not prohibit this meat.

The buying power of consumers are also under pressure in the European Union and because prices are lower in that region, larger quantities of beef, sheep meat, weaner calves and life goats are currently being imported into South Africa. It must also be accepted that Namibian weaner calves are now preferably marketed in South Africa, because of lower prices in the European Union. Indications are that the maize price will stay at relatively high levels, which also places downward pressure on prices paid for weaner calves in South Africa.

Dry conditions in certain parts of South Africa and Namibia also result in producers having to market their weaner calves. The buying of weaner calves by commercial producers is currently also at low levels.

The Namibian government a few years ago introduced a small stock scheme in terms of which six carcasses could be exported for each live sheep exported to South Africa. The RPO views
this scheme as monopolistic, since Namibian farmers are forced to slaughter their livestock in their own country.

Lamb prices in Namibia are currently as low as R36/kg. The export of live weaner calves and slaughter stock from Botswana is prohibited by Botswana legislation, while live goats, weaner calves and beef imports from Namibia are legal. This means that commercial animals have to go directly to a feedlot or abattoir. Stock going to a feedlot must subsequently be slaughtered immediately. It is illegal to trade Namibian weaner calves at South African auctions. Furthermore, import duty is payable on slaughter cattle for heavier cattle from Namibia.

Currently, about 200,000 weaner calves are imported annually from Namibia as well as approximately a million sheep carcasses and live sheep.

South Africa is a net importer of beef and mutton and live slaughter stock. Currently, about 5% of locally available beef is imported, while 30% of locally available mutton is imported.

Most of the imports are from Namibia and Botswana while overseas imports currently originate mostly from Australia and New Zealand and are currently at relatively low levels.

The RPO is involved with import monitoring and the statutory funds are partly utilised for this purpose. The RPO’s function in this regard entails ensuring that values are correctly declared, VAT payments are made, and that any transgressions are referred to authorities. Monthly reporting is undertaken.

Serious transgressions, like the Orion case are referred for legal prosecution to the Compliance Committee of the Red Meat Industry Forum.

The RPO is very concerned that live cattle and sheep imports from Namibia are in some cases resold in SA for breeding. This is illegal and will be taken up with the authorities.